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# SOME IMPLICATIONS OF BERGSON'S PHILOSOPHY

BY LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.

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WHEN a philosopher, accepted by the Academical, reaches the stage at which four hundred and seventeen books and pamphlets are written about his philosophy in twenty years; when thousands of people are turned from the doors of his discourses in both Paris and New York, and women's clubs clamor to hear him explained, it is quite time to find out what elements in a serious thinker have also gone to building up his popularity.

One can always take it for granted that it is not the serious and coherent thought that has appealed to the multitude. One has only to see how Bergson's name figures in the religious reviews to realize that what the rank and file have found in him for their solace is a reason for the faith that is in them. The world in its wild whirl toward democracy is more and more impatient of authority and less and less willing to accept one mode of thought as more convincing than another. Democracy believes in itself; not in authority. It accepts snap judgments as readily as the result of years of precisely worked out theory of life.

Probably the first reason to offer for Bergson's amazing vogue is that the people—the people with a big P—of whom our great ex-President so often volubly speaks—believe in their own feelings, and in reading Bergson they identify their spontaneous emotions with Bergson's intuitions. Secondly, mankind cannot and will not live without hope, and so far as they can follow Bergson's theory of creative evolution they derive hope from it. Again, Bergson is one of the few great philosophers who do not shy at the word God, and so long as we have with us the humble, the meek, the poor-in-spirit, we shall have with us also that word, or some equivalent for that word.

Even those who have read Bergson so superficially that they have overlooked his use of the word still feel that it is implicated in his entire setting forth of the processes of life. In vain will Dr. Dewey, with his cold, relentless logic, insist that if the traits which he alleges demarcate perception, and the objective material with which it deals from a reality marked by genuine presence of temporal considerations have disappeared, then Bergson's whole theory of time, memory, and mind, as things inherently sundered from organic action, must be revised. This is the thesis Dr. Dewey undertakes to make clear in his *Perception and Organic Action*. But alas! he writes in a language unknown to the people, and pleads for results which run counter to the prejudices and innate demands of all humanity.

The one great tragedy of all human life is isolation; the one great solace of the human soul is solidarity or the feeling of being bound to other souls, to other systems, to other ages. Why otherwise this age-old tendency of mankind to find a common power to serve, cajole, fear, and finally love? Why otherwise this increasing search to find our world bound up with other worlds, our time to all times, our system to greater systems? "The soul," as Maeterlinck says, "is very lonely." This is one of the most fundamental emotions of life. Whatever philosopher then can meet this emotion with hope and promise offers consolation. And is it not solace, and always and ever solace, that "the damned human race," as Mark Twain lovingly called it, is reaching out for?

Doubtless the solace Bergson gives is not so immediate or so vital as the uninitiate who read him believe. But he offers a handle to all the spiritualistically inclined when he says:

Things and states are only views taken by our mind, of becoming. *There are no things, there are only actions.* . . . Now I have every reason to believe that other worlds are analogous to ours, that things happen there in the same way. . . . Now if the same kind of action is going on everywhere, whether it is that which is unmaking itself or whether it is that which is striving to remake itself, I simply express this probable similitude when I speak of a center from which worlds shoot out like rockets in a fireworks display—provided, however, that I do not present this center as a *thing*, but as a continuity of shooting out. God thus defined has nothing of the already made; He is unceasing life, action, freedom. Creation so conceived is not a mystery; we experience it in ourselves when we act freely.

He continues:

That new things can join things already existing is absurd, no doubt, since the *thing* results from a solidification performed by our understanding, and there are never any things other than those that the understanding has thus constituted. To think of things creating themselves would therefore amount to saying that the understanding presents to itself more than it presents to itself.

Now what average man draws from this is that matter, that terrible weight under which creation grows and travails, is the slave of the spirit and to be controlled by the spirit and understanding, which is the sole hope of man. Life is a great spiritual movement, of which materiality is the inverse movement; the matter which forms a world is an undivided flux—but undivided also the life (or spirit) that runs through it, cutting out in it living beings all along its track.

This gives men the sense of the unity of spirit and spirits' unified striving, which is consoling.

Again, in a world where freedom so often seems a dream and where so many philosophies leave us thinking of ourselves as petty automatons, it is comforting to read:

Let us seek in the depths of our experience the point where we feel ourselves most intimately within our own life. It is into pure duration that we then plunge back, a duration in which the past, always moving on, is swelling unceasingly with a present that is absolutely new. But at the same time we feel the spring of our will strained to its utmost limit. We must by a strong recoil of our personality on itself gather up our past which is slipping away, in order to thrust it, compact and undivided, into a present which it will create by entering. Rare indeed are the moments when we are self-possessed to this extent: it is then that our actions are truly free.

Here, then, is a partial reinstatement of human freedom, not so different, indeed, from the freedom we have always believed in. If we sum up our past, if we get an idea of it as a whole, and then with all the consciousness and understanding and will we have gained push on to the present moment, we do freely create it.

One more point of solace in Bergson's philosophy is the sternness with which he has shown the intellect its place. It is a valuable instrument for advising as to immediate action, but it has never given us an inkling as to the ultimate nature of reality. That which lends us the sense of reality is the power within which the average man, and even more—all women—trust.

Instinct is sympathy. If this sympathy could extend its object and also reflect upon itself, it would give us the key to vital operations—just as intelligence, developed and disciplined, guides us into matter. For—we cannot too often repeat it—intelligence and instinct are turned in opposite directions, the former toward inert matter, the latter toward life. Intelligence by means of science, which is its work, will deliver up to us more and more completely the secret of physical operations; of life it brings us, and, moreover, only claims to bring us, a translation in terms of inertia. . . . But it is to the very inwardness of life that intuition leads us—by intuition I mean instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely.

Only technical philosophers can pick flaws in Bergson's logic, but the average interested reader will come from him consoled and strengthened, realizing that he has had restored to him faith in the intuitions which have always seemed to him to lie deeper than his logical reason; belief in freedom and responsibility, and finally rescue from a hopeless isolation. He has, indeed, given men more power to act and to live. For, reading him, we feel

ourselves no longer isolated in humanity, humanity no longer isolated in the nature that it dominates. As the smallest grain of dust is bound up with our entire solar system, drawn along with it in that undivided movement of descent which is materially itself, so all organized beings, from the humblest to the highest, from the first origins of life to the time in which we are, and in all places as in all times, do but evidence a single impulsion, the inverse of the movement of matter, and in itself indivisible. All the living hold together and all yield to the same tremendous push. The animal takes its stand on the plant, man bestrides animality, and the whole of humanity, in space and in time, is one immense army galloping beside and before and behind each of us in an overwhelming charge, able to beat down every resistance and clear the most formidable obstacles, perhaps even death.

When a great philosopher can speak to other philosophers with authority, and yet with an eloquence and a power which reach the average man, and can honestly offer the bread of life, Hope, there is no further need to account for the four hundred and seventeen volumes written about him in the last twenty years.

LOUISE COLLIER WILLCOX.